

Christianity



Introductory profiles adapted from
*On Common Ground: World
Religions in America*

Pluralism Project, Harvard University
Religious Literacy Project, Harvard
Divinity School

February 5, 2015

"Cristo Redentor," Mark Menzies (2009),
from Flickr Creative Commons.



Table of Contents

A Worldwide Tradition	1
The Life and Teachings of Jesus	2
The Death and Resurrection of Jesus	4
Birth of the Church	5
Credo: "I Believe..."	7
Orthodox Christian Churches	8
The Roman Catholic Church and the Catholic Communion	10
The Protestant Movement	12
Mission to the World	14
The Modern Era	15

Religion profiles are adapted from *On Common Ground: World Religions in America*, a resource of the Pluralism Project (www.pluralism.org/ocg).

The Pluralism Project at Harvard University

The Religious Literacy Project at Harvard Divinity School

"Tigray" by Evgeni Zotov (2009) at Flickr Creative Commons.

Preface: How to Read These Profiles

In these religion profiles, our focus is on particular religious traditions with an emphasis on 1) their internal diversity, and 2) the ways that the traditions are always evolving and changing. Though we hope these profiles provide helpful introductions, this format is a bit misleading in that it can reinforce the idea that religions exist and develop in isolation from other social and historical forces, including other religions. While reading these profiles, please remember that religions always impact and are impacted by political, economic, social, and historical factors. Please see the Methods article for fuller explanation of these intersections and the Country Profiles for a demonstration of how to understand religious influences in particular social and historical contexts.

A Worldwide Tradition

Christianity is a worldwide religious tradition with diverse representations, beliefs and practices. But its common source is one: the life, the teachings, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus. This man, whom Christians call the [Christ](#), the [Messiah](#), or the expected one, was born in Roman-occupied Palestine about 2,000 years ago. He lived his life as a [Jew](#) in a region ruled by Roman authorities. Like many prophets before him, he spoke of the urgent need to turn to God and he taught a message of love and justice. His active ministry of teaching was, at most, about three years long. Still in his thirties, he was charged with treason and put to death. His followers reported that he was resurrected from the dead and that he appeared before them.

Jesus left no writings, nor did others write about him until decades after he died. However, the small number of [disciples](#) that experienced his resurrection were inspired with an energy that led to the creation of communities of faith throughout the Mediterranean world and, eventually, throughout the whole world. It was in Antioch, now in modern-day Turkey, that they were first called "Christians," followers of the way of Christ. In the first three centuries, Christianity spread throughout the Greco-Roman world, which extended from the Iberian to the Indian coast. From

the fifth to the seventh century, Christian outreach spread throughout northern Europe. Syrian Christians even [missionized](#) in China during this time. In the tenth century, [missionaries](#) from Constantinople brought Christianity to Russia.

Today Christianity has three major streams, each possessing its own internal pluralism — the Catholic Communion, the Orthodox Christian Churches, and Protestant movements. Some would now argue that Anglicanism, which followed the course of the British Empire, and the [Pentecostalism](#) sweeping the globe constitute other major streams of the Christian tradition. But these broad categories hardly do justice to the hundreds of particular churches and denominations that have come into being through the centuries and that continue to be born today. In the early twenty-first century, Christianity has more adherents than any other religious tradition on earth. One third of all humans call themselves Christians. The Christian scriptures have been translated into a multitude of languages in cultures throughout the world. The great diversity of Christianity is one of its most striking characteristics.

Christianity has continued to grow and change in the twenty-first century, with the rapid multiplication of Christian churches in Africa, including many vibrant independent churches. In Latin America, four centuries of Roman Catholic dominance is now being challenged by the rapid growth of Pentecostalism. By the late twentieth century, the majority of the world's Christians lived in the southern hemisphere. While Christianity is growing most rapidly in Africa and Latin America, it is still the dominant religious tradition of Europe and North America.

The Life and Teachings of Jesus



The story of Jesus, as Christians know and tell it, comes from that part of the Bible called the [“New Testament.”](#) The first four books—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—are known as the “gospels,” meaning “good news.” They were all written between approximately 70 and 100 CE, about two generations after the death of Jesus, and are based on stories of Jesus told and retold by his followers. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the [“synoptic” gospels](#), because they present a “common view” of Jesus through many common sayings, [parables](#), and events. Both Matthew and Luke seem to have used Mark’s gospel in writing their own accounts. John’s gospel has a distinctive voice, focusing more on the divinity of Christ in the context of a cosmic worldview. The gospels come out of early communities still struggling with their identity in a Jewish context. The Gospel of Matthew, for instance, is most conscious of the debates within Judaism after the [destruction of the Temple in 70 CE](#), while the Gospel of John shows signs of Christians being expelled from synagogues. Although the gospels differ in their accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry, sometimes in significant ways, the early church did not

“Born in those who desire him,” (Detail from an wool embroidered banner in the convent of the Dominican sisters of Stone, Staffordshire, 2008). Lawrence OP, from Flickr Creative Commons.

blend them into one account but preserved these four distinct gospels with their differences. Together they provide four views of the life and teachings of Jesus.

According to the traditions of Luke and Matthew, Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judaea in the lineage of King David. Theirs is a story in which the ordinary and the miraculous intertwine. The mother of Jesus is said to be Mary, who conceived Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit (an act of the divine) while she was still a young unmarried virgin; Joseph, her betrothed, was a carpenter from Nazareth. Luke's story is familiar to Christians throughout the world: The couple traveled to Bethlehem to be counted in the census and, finding no room at the inn, they had to stay in a stable. Jesus was born that night, his first bed a manger filled with hay. Nearby shepherds with their flocks heard angels singing and hurried to see the newborn child. Matthew says nothing of the stable or the shepherds, but tells of wise men or astrologers, who saw the light of a star and came from the East bringing gifts to honor the child. Mark and John omit the birth story altogether, Mark beginning his account with the baptism of Jesus and John with the creation of the cosmos.

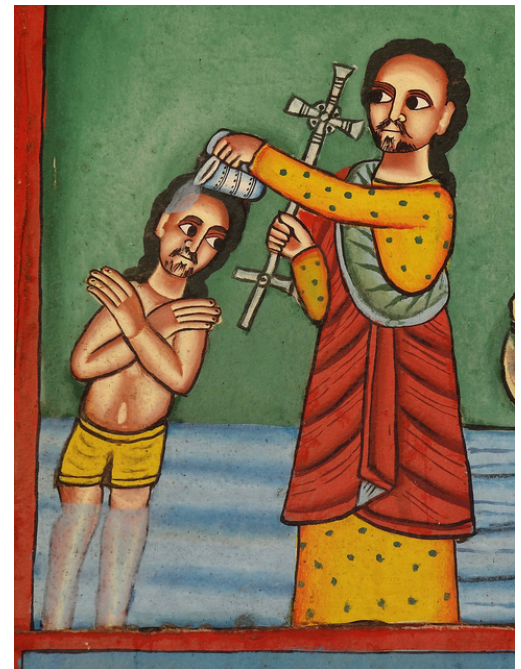
There is little recorded of the childhood of Jesus, except Luke's story of how, at the age of twelve, Jesus' parents found him teaching the rabbis in the temple in Jerusalem. All four gospels, however, speak of the critical event of Jesus' [baptism](#) by [John the Baptist](#). The gospels do not mention his age, but historians say that Jesus was about thirty. John's message was one of radical repentance and transformation. It was a time of political turmoil and religious expectation; there were many Jewish movements that looked forward to a new age, the coming of the Kingdom of God and the long-promised Messiah, the "anointed one."

John the Baptist looked to the new age, announcing that the Kingdom of God was near and baptizing people by the thousands in the River Jordan as an initiation into the kingdom to come. One of those he baptized was Jesus of Nazareth. Mark's gospel begins with this account of Jesus' baptism: When Jesus came up out of the water, the skies were torn open and the Spirit, like a dove from heaven, descended upon Jesus with the words, "You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased."

Jesus' baptism marks the beginning of his public ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing. He was accompanied by a group of followers, some of them fishermen who left their nets and their families, and some of them women whose presence can be seen throughout the period of Jesus' ministry. Jesus attracted large crowds as he began to teach in Galilee. His message of repentance and turning to God was coupled with a message of God's generosity, forgiveness, love and justice.

The gospels describe miracles performed by Jesus: healing the sick, casting out the demons of mental illness from the tormented, and even bringing the dead back to life. They also portray a powerful teacher whose parables made their point in surprising ways. Yes, one should love one's neighbor, but who is the neighbor? In one parable, a man is robbed,

[Type text]



"Depiction of Baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist," Yesus Church, Axum, Ethiopia (2013), Adam Jones, from Flickr Creative Commons.

beaten, and left on the road. Many pass him by without giving him help, including respected members of his own community. The one who stops to help him is a Samaritan, a person from Samaria considered a foreigner and an outsider. Jesus insists that the “great commandment” to love one’s neighbor as oneself crosses all ethnic and religious barriers.

In his ministry, Jesus crossed many social barriers as well, mingling with the tax collector, the adulterer, and the prostitute. He warned critics to remember their own imperfections before condemning others and invited those who were wholly without sin to cast the first stone of condemnation. The great commandment is not to judge one’s neighbor but rather to love one’s neighbor, for judgment is God’s alone.

Jesus taught that the expected Kingdom of God was close at hand. It would not be an earthly political kingdom, but rather a new reign of justice for the poor and liberation for the oppressed. Those who would be included first in the Kingdom were not the elites and the powerful, but the poor, the rejected, the outcasts. Jesus likened the coming of the Kingdom of God to the growth of a tiny mustard seed, growing from within to create a new reality. His disciples and many who heard him began to speak of Jesus as the long-awaited redeemer, the Messiah, who would make the Kingdom of God a reality. When the term “Messiah” was translated into Greek, the word they used was *Christos*, the Christ.

The Death and Resurrection of Jesus

As Jesus traveled and preached, he angered the Roman rulers, who feared that he was provoking unrest among the people and planning a revolution. He was also feared by Jewish leaders because of his challenges to traditional authority and teachings. Jesus named hypocrisy where he saw it and urged his community to claim a new prophetic vision. Those who opposed him saw him as a dangerous upstart who wanted to form a cult around himself. Jesus was well aware of these charges against him by political and religious authorities, and he predicted that he would be attacked and persecuted.



“Good Friday observance in Barangay (barrio), San Fernando, Pampanga,” Philippines, 2011, Marco Repola from Flickr Creative Commons.

After a teaching ministry of perhaps three years, Jesus went to Jerusalem to observe the Jewish season of [Passover](#). There he warned those closest to him of his coming death and gathered them together for a meal that would be their last supper together. He was then betrayed to the Roman authorities by [Judas](#), one of his own followers, and captured. He was denounced by the Jewish high priest as a [blasphemer](#) who claimed to be the Messiah. Taken before the Roman authorities, Jesus was charged with sedition and executed by the Roman practice of [crucifixion](#), being nailed to a cross. It was Friday and burial rites would have to wait until the [Sabbath](#) was over.

Early Sunday morning, according to all the gospel accounts, some of the women who had followed and loved Jesus went to his tomb to prepare his body for a proper burial. When they

arrived, they discovered that the stone at the entry to the tomb had been rolled away and the tomb was empty.

[Type text]

According to the [synoptic gospels](#), a figure in dazzling white appeared and told the women that Jesus had been raised from the dead. In John's account, a man who seemed to be the gardener appeared to Mary Magdalene (a follower of Jesus) and spoke to her by name. It was Jesus. Although their accounts differ, the gospels report that in the following days, many of the disciples saw Jesus and experienced his presence. This experience of the living Christ is at the heart of the Christian faith.

Those who have adopted the Christian faith through the centuries have understood the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as a profound affirmation of God's presence in the midst of humanity. The "Christ event," according to many Christians, cannot be understood in the context of the first century alone: It is as much a twenty-first century event, repeated and renewed daily in the lives of those who take this as the story of their own faith.

Birth of the Church

Fifty days after the resurrection of Jesus, the disciples were together in Jerusalem. It was then at the time of the spring harvest festival of [Shavuot](#), seven weeks after the feast of [Passover](#), that they experienced the empowerment that would make them a new community. That day became known as [Pentecost](#) in the Christian church and celebrated as the "birthday of the Church." In the New Testament, the [Acts of the Apostles](#), written toward the end of the first century by the author of the *Gospel of Luke*, tells the story of the early church, beginning with this event. There in Jerusalem, where people gathered from many lands for the festival, the new community experienced the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, described as tongues of fire settling on their heads and enabling them to speak the good news of Jesus in all the languages on earth (Acts 2:4). It was an experience of empowerment which transformed a fearful and somewhat confused group of disciples into [apostles](#), those who literally are "sent" to give testimony to their faith.

The expansion of the early church was also given energy by the conversion of a Jewish tentmaker named Saul. According to the Acts of the Apostles, Saul had been a persecutor of Christians until he experienced the blinding light of God's presence as he traveled on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus. He became baptized as a Christian. For the rest of his life, he traveled the Mediterranean world nurturing small communities of Christians until he finally brought the gospel to Rome. He spoke in synagogues and to communities of Jews, affirming his faith in Christ as Messiah. However, he also spoke to [Gentiles](#)—to those who were not Jews—convinced that the message of new life in Christ was not for his people alone, but for men and women everywhere. As an apostle to the Gentiles, he is known by the Roman form of his name, [Paul](#).

[Type text]



"Pentecost," El Greco (1596), from WikiArt.

Paul's controversy with [Peter](#) and the community in Jerusalem was of utmost importance for early Christianity, as it gradually became differentiated from its Jewish roots. While Peter believed that Gentiles needed first to be [circumcised](#) and convert to Judaism before becoming Christian, Paul insisted that new Greek converts could become Christian directly. The [Council of Jerusalem](#) (about 50 CE) decided, with Paul, that Gentiles could become Christians without becoming Jews first. With this, the door was open for a new kind of Christian community. Paul's letters to the new churches of the Hellenistic world have become an integral part of the New Testament.



"Communion during Assembly 2014 in Louisville" Paul Jeffrey for United Methodist Women, from Flickr Creative Commons.

The Christian community is called the "church." The word in Greek was *ecclesia*, those who were "called out." They were called out of their former lives into a new community. The Book of Acts (2:44-47) describes the life of the first Christian community: "All who believed were together and shared all things in common, sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. And day by day attending temple together, breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."

In its largest sense, the church is universal—the community of all people who profess faith in Christ. This is what is meant by the term "catholic," which simply means "universal." In its most intimate sense, the church is "wherever two or three are gathered" in the name of Christ (Matthew 18:20). Whether universal or a gathering of two or three, the church is a community of people. The images of community in the New Testament are powerful, organic images of belonging. Most important, the church is described as "the body of Christ." As Paul puts it, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ." (I Corinthians 12:12). Not all parts of the body of Christ, the church, have the same function but all parts are connected and all suffer and rejoice together. This powerful metaphor is extended through the central ritual of the community, the blessing and sharing of bread and wine. The bread is called the "body of Christ," and the wine "the cup of the new covenant." As the bread and wine are one, so do those who share them affirm their oneness (I Corinthians 11:23-25). (See "The Christian Experience" for more information on this ritual.)

Through the preaching of Paul and other missionaries, the new Christian faith grew quickly, spreading throughout the Mediterranean world. Its primary competitor was not the sects nor the mystery religions of ancient Greece and Rome, but the [cult of the emperor](#), to whom all were required to do honor. For Christians, the "Lord" was Christ alone, and worshipping the emperor as Lord was impossible. The new Christian community was seen as subversive because of its refusal to participate in the cult of the emperor. Christians were persecuted and [martyred](#) for their faith throughout the Roman empire. Thus, it was a new day entirely

[Type text]

when the [Emperor Constantine](#) himself became a Christian early in the fourth century. Beginning with his reign, Christianity was not only made legal, but would become the official religion of the Empire.

Credo: “I Believe...”

One of the distinctive features of Christianity is its emphasis on a creed, a summary statement of faith. The term *credo* is often translated today as “I believe...” but it is important to remember that its literal meaning is, “I give my heart...” It is language of the heart, a profound expression of commitment, not simply a list of statements to which one gives intellectual assent. When the early church was being persecuted, commitment to the way of Christ was often dangerous, requiring real courage.

Creeds came into use as part of the rite of baptism. In this rite of initiation, a man or woman would take off old clothes, put on new white baptismal clothing, and become a Christian by a ritual bath and the affirmation of commitment to the Christian faith. The credo or creed expressed that commitment. Among the oldest creeds of the church is the [Apostles' Creed](#), composed about 150 CE and used ritually at the time of Christian baptism, beginning, “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, Our Lord...” Through baptism, one was spiritually “born again.” While the term “born again” has acquired the resonance of a dramatic and often emotion-laden conversion in modern American Christianity, it has a much wider and older significance for the church. To be born again is what it means to be a baptized Christian.



“Apostles Creed,” Plaque on the wall of St. Just in Roseland, Cornwall, John Kroll, Flickr Creative Commons.

[Type text]

Christians in the early church had to answer for themselves the question Christ asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” In the councils of the early church, leaders met to come to a common mind about their faith. The [Council of Nicaea](#), called by the Emperor Constantine in 325, was the most important of these early councils. In the previous centuries, some had proposed that Jesus Christ was not really human at all, but was God appearing to be human; others had proposed that he was not really divine, but only a human being. The early church rejected these views as it worked together to articulate its faith: that Jesus Christ was fully God and fully human. The council also worked to express the meaning of God as threefold, a trinity, encompassing three aspects or “persons”—the Father, the Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. At Nicaea, the church articulated the complexity of the divine mystery: that the One God is the transcendent Creator, the fully human Christ, and the indwelling energy, fire, and breath of the Spirit. This understanding was represented in the [Nicene Creed](#).

While the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed are the oldest and most universal creeds of the church, the process of articulating what it means to give one’s heart to Christ has

continued to the present. New creeds are written in each new era. For example, the United Church of Christ in the U.S.A. puts its belief in Christ this way: "In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord, you have come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death, and reconciling the world to yourself." In El Salvador, Christians affirm their faith in Christ, tested in the fires of economic and political struggle: "We believe in Christ, crucified again and again in the suffering of the poor..." Mormons affirm thirteen articles of faith, including: "We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly; we also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God."

Through the ages, there have been many doctrinal controversies, but the act of confessing one's faith has remained constant. For Christians to say "I believe..." is not only an articulation of fundamental doctrines, but also a personal commitment to the way of Christ.

Orthodox Christian Churches

The Eastern family of churches, today called the Oriental Orthodox and Eastern Orthodox churches, go back to the very earliest days of Christianity. During the first four centuries of the Common Era, Christianity had spread not only into the Roman and Byzantine Empires, but also into the present-day Middle East, North Africa, and India. They were united through a [pentarchy](#) that revered [patriarchal sees](#) in Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople, Jerusalem and Rome. Following the Council of Chalcedon in 451, however, the [Christological controversies](#) led by [Nestorius](#) and [Cyril](#) influenced the first major schism in the Church. A group of communities that eventually became known as comprising the Oriental Orthodox Church rejected the decree that the nature of Christ was united as one and instead promoted the idea that Christ's human and divine natures remained distinct. Christians of Egypt, Ethiopia, Syria, Armenia, India, Iraq, and Iran either formally followed these men into schism or quietly fell off the Greco-Roman radar due to vast distances and difficult terrain. Furthermore, in the centuries that followed, the growing estrangement between the Roman and Greek Christians eventually led to the second major schism of 1054, which culminated in a crisis as the Pope of Rome and the Patriarch of Constantinople [excommunicated](#) each other. The institutions headed by each became known respectively as the (Roman) Catholic Church and the (Eastern) Orthodox Churches.

The distinctive theologies and liturgies of the Orthodox churches have continued to develop into the twenty-first century. One particularly characteristic theological stance of the Christ event from an Orthodox perspective is the emphasis on the incarnation of Christ as a means to raise human nature to the Divine. As [Athanasius](#) put it in the fourth century, "the Son of God became man so that man might become God." This emphasis on theosis, "becoming divine," stands in contrast to the heavy emphasis on human sinfulness present in much of the theology of the Western churches.



Russian Orthodox Archbishop Ambrose of Peterhof visited the Holy Mount Athos, 2014, St. Petersburg Orthodox Seminary, Flickr Creative Commons

[Type text]



St. Anthony of Egypt, Burgos Cathedral, Burgos, Spain. Lawrence OP, Flickr Creative Commons.

[Monasticism](#) was an important part of the early church tradition, as devout men and women left urban life and the growing institutions of the church for a life of devotion to God in prayer and simplicity. Monastic life began as early as the fourth century, with St. Anthony and the Desert Fathers of Egypt, in whom both Eastern and Western traditions of monasticism find their source and inspiration. As Eastern monasticism developed, it included both communal and solitary religious life and emphasized physical austerity. From these early centuries onward, the Eastern traditions also developed practices of inner contemplative prayer called the “prayer of the heart” or the “[Jesus prayer](#)”. These forms of concentration and breath-centered prayer have been preserved in the spiritual treasury of the church to the present day.

As part of a rich spiritual and liturgical tradition, the Orthodox churches also developed the distinctive use of pictorial [icons](#) of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints. These icons were understood to be windows into the sacred meaning and presence of these figures, not mere representations of them. The [second council of Nicaea](#) in 787 affirmed the role of icons in the face of virulent criticism from those who objected to any visual images in worship.

During the seventh century, Christianity encountered the challenge of Islam, a new religious tradition which gained ground in Palestine, Syria and Egypt, and from Anatolia to Spain. The great Dome of the Rock mosque was completed in Jerusalem in 692. Eight centuries later, the [Byzantine Empire](#), centered at Constantinople, fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453. The great centers of Orthodoxy, including Constantinople, became centers of Islamic rule, and its great churches became mosques. For hundreds of years, the encounter with Islam has been of significance and immediacy for Oriental Orthodox and Eastern Orthodox churches.



“Παναγία η Γαλακτοτροφούσα,” 2012, Michael Hadjimichael, Flickr Creative Commons.

Today, the Eastern Orthodox churches constitute a family of related churches, including the Greek, Russian, Bulgaria, Romanian, and Syrian churches, each with a rich history and distinctive [liturgical](#) forms. Oriental Orthodox churches include the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Coptic Church of Egypt, the Ethiopian Church, the Eritrean Church, the Church of St. Thomas in India, and the Jacobite Syrian Church of Antioch. In 2001, a council of bishops representing both the Eastern Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox churches declared their Christologies effectively consistent, citing linguistic and political factors for the historical disagreement. While the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental churches are not yet fully reconciled they, like

[Type text]

the Eastern Catholic churches (those who are in communion with Rome but who follow Eastern traditions of worship) share very similar theology and practices. Reconciliation efforts continue today.

The Roman Catholic Church and the Catholic Communion

The early church spoke of its fellowship of believers as “catholic,” a word which means “universal.” Today, the whole Christian church still affirms “one holy, catholic, and apostolic church” in the Nicene Creed. However, the term Catholic with a capital “C” also applies in common parlance to the Churches within the Catholic Communion, centered in Rome. The Church of Rome is one of the oldest Christian communities, tracing its history to the apostles Peter and Paul in the first century. As it developed, it emphasized the central authority and primacy of the bishop of Rome, who became known as the Pope. By the eleventh century, the Catholic Church broke with the Byzantine Church of the East over issues of both authority and doctrine. Particularly in response to this division, several attempts were made to restore union and to heal the wounds of division between the Churches.



Pope Francis, 2013, Catholic Church England, Flickr Creative Commons.

During the early 15th century, many in the Roman Church regarded the impending Turkish invasion of the Byzantine Empire as a “work of Providence” to bind divided Christianity together. In response, the [Council of Florence](#) envisioned union on a grandiose scale not only with the Greek Byzantine churches, but also with the Copts, Ethiopians, Armenians and [Nestorians](#). Despite the presence of nearly 700 Eastern representatives and 360 Latin representatives and the energetic debates that ensued, reunion was not achieved.

Though disappointed with the failure of the Council of Florence, the Roman Church began to pursue an attractive alternative inspired by the unexpected union with the [Maronite Church](#) in the twelfth century. This alternative consisted in the creation of [Uniate churches](#) – Eastern in ritual and law but Roman in religious allegiance. Though the term “uniate” has some derogatory connotations, the reconciliation that this term signifies is an important historical development.



Detail of Benedictine Monks, Giovanni Antonio Bazzi (d. 1549), Tuscany, Italy, Jacqueline Poggi, Flickr Creative Commons.

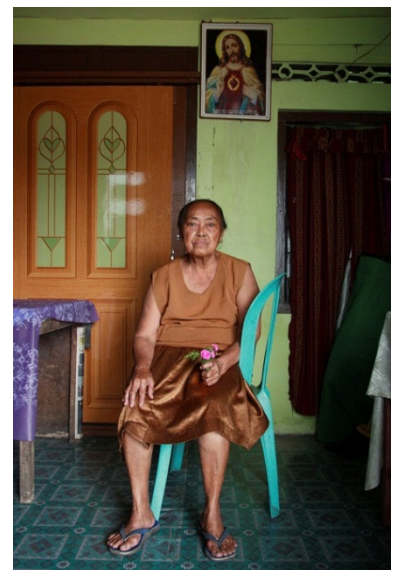
Meanwhile, the predominantly Roman church continued to develop strong traditions of monasticism that began with Benedict (480-550) who wrote the “Rule of St. Benedict” where he described the principles of prayer, work, and study essential to the monastic life. Even in the early 21st century, this document continues to be foundational for the life of Benedictine communities all over the world. Many of the missionaries of the church were monks, such as the Venerable Bede (673-735) who brought spiritual

Adapted from On Common Ground (www.pluralism.org/christianity)

leadership to the early church in England and Boniface (680-754) who was the “apostle of Germany.” In the early Middle Ages, Benedictine monasteries became large landholders and powerful forces in the local economy. Through the chaos of the Middle Ages, after the fall of the Roman Empire, they played an essential role in preserving the spiritual, artistic, and intellectual life of the church.

In the twelfth century, other orders developed that rejected the cloistered and sometimes wealthy life of the monastery, set apart from society, preferring more engaged models of Christian community. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) and the Franciscan order emphasized both individual and communal poverty, simplicity, and service—not apart from the people, but among them. Dominic (1170-1221) and the Dominican order emphasized education, preaching, and teaching. Members of these orders were often reformers as well, calling for a renewal of monasticism and the church as a whole.

In the sixteenth century, one of those reformers, the [Augustinian friar](#) Martin Luther (1483-1546), broke with the church entirely and launched the Protestant Reformation. The [Council of Trent](#) (1545–1563) followed with its own reform of corrupt practices within the Catholic Church. Part of a movement known as the “Catholic Reformation” or the “Counter-Reformation,” the Council of Trent reasserted the visible, hierarchical, and structured authority of the Roman Catholic Church. This period of Catholic renewal reinvigorated the educational and missionary zeal of the church with the establishment of the Society of Jesus, also called the Jesuits, founded by Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556). Especially with the colonization and conversion of Latin America and with its missions to Asia and Africa, the Roman Catholic Church became a worldwide church. Unfortunately, the strong reaction to the Protestant movement would have a negative impact upon the Eastern Catholic churches as conformity to the Roman standard became the norm. Only the [Second Vatican Council](#) would begin the process of correcting this mentality.



Catholic woman in Indonesia, Henri Ismail, 2007, from Flickr Creative Commons.

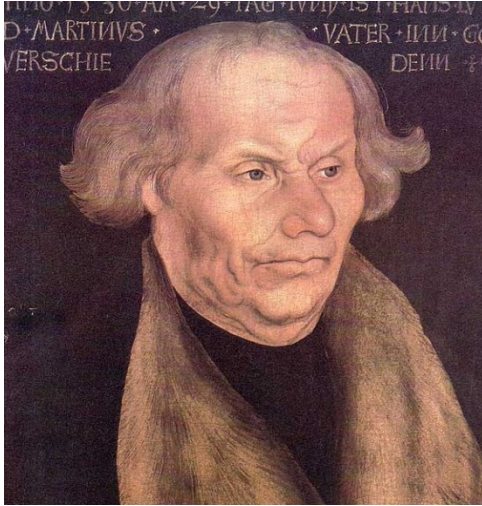
Today, the Catholic Communion is centered at the Vatican in Rome, but its [synods](#), [councils of bishops](#), and local [parishes](#) carry on the life and work of the church on every continent. More than half of the world’s Christians are Catholic. The Second Vatican Council considered seriously the new role of the church in the modern world. Among the many decisions of the Council was to abandon the predominantly Latin mass in favor of worship in the language and in the cultural forms of the local community. Another focus was on a new openness to other religious traditions as represented in the document *Nostra Aetate* (*In Our Time*). A third focus was on how the church should emphasize not only preaching and [sacraments](#), but a vigorous mission to the poor and those in need.

This emphasis helped give rise to a movement known as “liberation theology” that began in Latin America in the 1970s and spread throughout many parts of the world. Liberation theologians such as the Peruvian Dominican Gustavo Gutiérrez were initially focused on economic injustices. He interpreted the Gospels as promoting a “preferential option for the poor” and declared structures of oppression that perpetuated cycles of poverty and despair as sinful. This movement spread throughout much of the global south and eventually inspired other

[Type text]

emancipation theologies in the United States and elsewhere such as Black Liberation Theology, Feminist Liberation Theology, and Womanist Theology. These latter movements were often led by Protestants and included members from many other religious traditions (and none).

The Protestant Movement



Portrait of Martin Luther by Lucas Cranach the Elder, 1527 from Wikimedia Commons.

The sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation was sparked by Martin Luther, a German monk whose studies of the Bible led him to attack the leadership of the Catholic Church in his day. First, Luther insisted that religious authority lay not primarily in church traditions, nor in the hierarchy of bishops and popes, but in the Bible alone. The teaching of the church and its leaders must be judged by the standard and teaching of the Bible, which is the sole authoritative source of the Christian faith. Further, Luther insisted that the Bible and the worship life of the church be translated from Latin into the language of the people, so that all might hear and understand it.

From his reading of the New Testament, Luther also concluded that salvation is by God's grace alone, not by virtue of anything one might do to merit it. And salvation is by faith alone, by the disposition of the heart, not by any penance a priest may prescribe. Luther especially objected to what were known as "[indulgences](#)" sold by the church to assure one's own well-being in the afterlife or the well-being of those who had already died. Luther preached that salvation cannot be earned, much less bought, for it is a gift. In his break with Rome, Martin Luther left the monastic life and married, thus establishing the precedent for married clergy in the Protestant churches. He emphasized the faith of the laity, the Christian life within society, and the "priesthood" of all believers. Luther was [excommunicated](#) from the Roman Catholic Church in 1521.

The Protestant Reformation marked the beginning of what would become a new movement in the Christian tradition. Its leaders and forms were many, but the spirit of the Protestant tradition continued to emphasize the importance of personal faith, the gift of grace, and the authority of the Bible. In Germany, the Lutheran tradition built on Martin Luther's heritage. Lutheran national churches also developed in Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Finland. The Lutheran churches of America today include descendants from all of these churches.



"Quaker witness for peace & justice in front of the San Francisco Federal Building," Steve Rhodes (2008), Flickr Creative Commons.

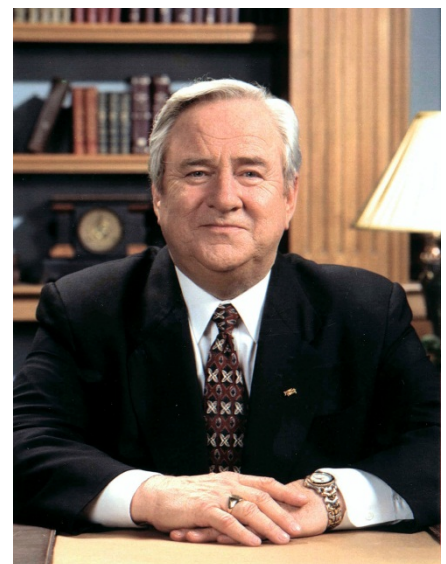
[Type text]

The “Reformed” churches have their roots in Switzerland, where Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) launched a movement of church reform in Zurich in 1522. At the same time in Geneva, John Calvin (1509-1564) led a movement that helped found Reformed churches in the Netherlands, Hungary, England, and Scotland. The Presbyterian churches are also part of this Reformed tradition, and developed initially under the leadership of the sixteenth-century Scottish reformer, John Knox (1514-1572). Today’s Baptists and Congregationalists trace their lineage back to the ideas of Zwingli and Calvin as well.

The more radical Anabaptists took issue with Zwingli and the reformers in Zurich over two issues: the establishment of a state church and infant baptism. They held that Christian faith is a conscious and voluntary commitment of the heart. Thus, they rejected the coercion of any state church and also rejected infant baptism in favor of the baptism of adult believers. The Anabaptists also shaped the formation of the Baptists churches as well as the historic “peace churches,” such as the Quakers and the Mennonites.

The English Reformation began in the sixteenth century when King Henry VIII declared the independence of the Church of England from the authority of the Pope. Some Protestants in England went even further than Henry and called for a complete purification of the church. Later known as “Puritans,” these radical dissenters in the Church of England set out for North America in the early 1600s. They envisioned establishing a Christian community, a “holy commonwealth” in the new world. In the 1700s, John Wesley (1703-1791), a priest of the Church of England, launched an energetic devotional reform movement, emphasizing the forgiveness and grace of a loving God. This movement eventually became known as Methodism. Those who remained within the Church of England spread their version of Christianity as the British Empire encircled the world. After the Empire’s dissolution, those churches banded together as the Worldwide Anglican Communion.

Evangelicals have also played a key role in ongoing reformation efforts. Originally, the term was used to describe the 18th-19th century religious reform movements and denominations that resulted from the revivals that swept the North Atlantic Anglo-American world. These revivals were led by figures like John Wesley, the itinerant English evangelist George Whitefield (1715-1770), and American preacher and theologian Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758). By the 1820s, Evangelicals dominated the American Protestant scene, and played a major role in reform movements such as [abolitionism](#) and [prohibition](#). In the early twentieth century, conservative Evangelicals (known as [Fundamentalists](#)) who rejected [Darwinism](#) and [modern biblical criticism](#) would retreat from public life after the [Scopes Trial](#) in 1925, only to re-emerge on the national political and social scenes decades later.



Jerry Falwell, founder of the Moral Majority, Wikimedia Commons.

In the 1960s and up to the present day, emancipation movements throughout the globe have been and continue to be heavily influenced by Protestants. Sometimes linked to liberation theology movements and other times independent of them, figures who are motivated by their faith to promote human rights include Desmond Tutu (1931-) in South Africa, Naim Stifan Ateek (1937-) in Palestine, Hisaku Kinakawa in Japan, and

[Type text]

Ella Baker (1903-1986), Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968), Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz (1943-2012) and Beverly Harrison (1932-2012) in the United States.

During the Reagan era in the United States, conservative organizations like the Moral Majority and Concerned Women for America were motivated by what they perceived as a loss of traditional family values. As a result, many Evangelicals focused on issues such as homosexuality, abortion, and the direction of mass media. Other movements within Evangelicalism included Sojourners, a group committed to promoting peace and social justice since the 1970s and intentional communities like the Simple Way in Philadelphia which seeks to reform the faith by adapting traditional monastic practices for a modern context. The Simple Way focused on issues like environmental sustainability and challenging systems that oppressed the poor and marginalized.

The Protestant Reformation, therefore, launched not a Protestant Church, but a Protestant movement—a dynamic movement of many churches, engaged in energetic and ongoing reformation, even today.

Mission to the World

The history of Christian missions is as old as the church, inspired by the commission Christ left his followers to “make disciples of all nations.” Such zeal was seen in the early Syrian Christians who missionized as far as India and China in the early third to seventh centuries. It was also the mission of early Roman monks that first planted churches in Ireland and England, Germany and Northern Europe, Russia and Eastern Europe. However, the sixteenth century, which saw both the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic “Counter-Reformation,” was also the beginning of European colonial expansion and with it, church expansion. The Spanish conquered and colonized in the lands of South America, Mexico, and the Philippines. The Portuguese planted colonies in Brazil, Africa, India, and China. The British Empire included territories in India, Ceylon, Burma, Africa, Australia, and North America. The Dutch were in Indonesia and Africa. The French had colonies in Africa, Southeast Asia, and North America.

The spread of Christian churches followed in the tracks of empire, trade, and colonization. At times, the churches and missionaries were involved or complicit in the exploitation and oppression of colonized people. It is also true, however, that missionaries were among the strongest critics of colonial excesses. Many were the first scholars to study the religious and cultural traditions of the peoples among whom they worked. Especially in Asia, missionaries were also the first to challenge the exclusivist teachings of the church, for they saw what they understood to be evidence of God’s living presence in non-Christian faiths.

The order of Jesuits or the Society of Jesus, founded in the sixteenth century, was influential as a Catholic missionary order, sending Jesuits to such places as India and China. Later, Protestant missionary societies were formed to link the Protestant churches of Europe, and later the United States, with the new churches established in Asia and Africa.

With the end of the colonial era, the mission churches began to develop strong voices and leadership of their own. Today,
[Type text]



much of the dynamism and energy of the Christian churches worldwide comes from the churches of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The last few decades have seen a renewed emphasis on the expression of the gospel in every culture and language. In the post-colonial era, churches in all parts of the world have moved away from European or American expressions of Christianity and have claimed their own culture, music, and arts in order to shape their own forms of Christian worship and community.

Today, many of these new cultural and ethnic expressions have come to America with the new immigration. As with first-generation immigrants in the past, these immigrants have maintained their own congregations—Korean, Samoan, Ethiopian, South Indian, or Chinese—and have brought an astounding new diversity to the face of American Christianity.

The Modern Era

The modern period, heralded by what is known as the Enlightenment, began in the West in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the end of the religious wars that had torn Europe apart. In the wake of years of bloodshed over religious doctrine, eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers emphasized religious toleration and the need to separate religious life from political power. The role of reason in religious thinking—that people should be free to use their intellect to make up their own minds about what they believed—was reaffirmed. A current of thought called Deism, for example, stressed “natural religion,” a creator God, and a common moral and ethical ethos, without many of the supernatural elements that, they believed, confounded the principles of reason. Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, so prominent in framing the American Constitution, were influenced by this movement. During the last two centuries, the role of reason in the realm of faith has continued to inspire Christian thinkers.

The Enlightenment was also influenced by the scientific revolution that began to transform assumptions about the natural world, beginning with Isaac Newton in the seventeenth century. In the nineteenth century, the work of Charles Darwin challenged the biblical story of creation with his theories about the development and evolution of species as published in *The Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871). In the modern era, Christian thinkers of each succeeding generation have had to claim and articulate their faith anew in the light of a wider worldview, informed by the expansion of science. Does faith today occupy the shrinking area of mystery diminished by the growing body of scientific knowledge? Or is faith an orientation to all of life that is not threatened by science but rather consonant with it?

Biblical scholarship has also posed challenges to faith in the modern era. The text of the Bible has been laid open to study by methods of critical and historical analysis. What is the Bible? How did this particular collection of writings come into being? Is each word the revelation of God or is it a collection of inspired writings that may be studied and interpreted as products of particular historical contexts, with their own historical concerns? In the early twentieth century, a movement known as [Fundamentalism](#) arose in opposition to many trends in modern biblical scholarship. Fundamentalist Christians have been concerned with protecting the literal interpretation of the Bible from what they consider to be the undermining effects of Biblical scholarship. More liberal Christians, on the other hand, generally do not find the intensive scholarly study of the Bible a threat to their faith, but rather an enhancement of their understanding of it.

[Type text]

The second half of the twentieth century saw new currents of confluence, bringing together once again the divided streams that have characterized Christianity for nearly a thousand years. This trend is called the ecumenical movement, from the Greek term “oikoumene” which means “the whole inhabited earth.” The most prominent expression of this ecumenical movement is the World Council of Churches (WCC), formed in 1948. Today it is a fellowship of over three hundred Protestant and Orthodox churches committed to growing together in faith and working together on shared issues of justice, peace, education, and emergency relief. In the 1960s, the Second Vatican Council also made far-reaching contributions to Christian ecumenism, opening the door to closer cooperation between the Roman Catholic and other Christian churches. Toward the end of the Second Vatican Council, the Pope and the Patriarch of Constantinople removed their one thousand year old mutual excommunication and embraced.



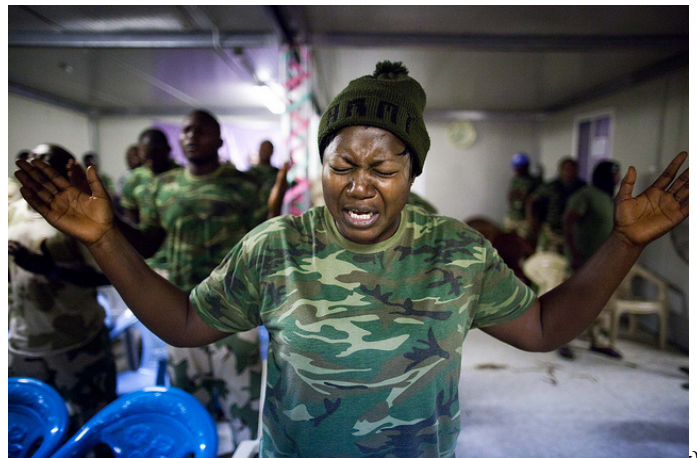
"First Ordained Woman," Messiah Lutheran Church, Flickr Creative Commons.

The convergence of churches today is visible in many ways. National, regional, and local councils of churches throughout the world are another expression of the ecumenical movement. While old divisions are beginning to heal, new areas of tension and fission are opening in the Christian churches of the early twenty-first century. The interpretation of the Bible, the ordination of women, attitudes toward gays and lesbians, and the ethics of abortion and reproduction are all issues that have opened new fissures both between and within denominations.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the resurgence of evangelical Christianity worldwide is sometimes called a “third force” in the Christian ecumenical movement, along with the Vatican and the World Council of Churches. The National Association of Evangelicals, founded in 1942, describes itself as being a “united voice” for evangelicals. Despite their differences, evangelicals today base their theology on a strong commitment to the Bible as the only infallible and authoritative word of God. There is also emphasis placed on personal faith, expressed by “accepting Christ” into one’s own life, and on evangelism, or the sharing of that faith with others in mission. The worldwide

ministry of Billy Graham (1918-), with his huge rallies and revivals, is an example of how mid-twentieth century evangelists made effective use of the television communications revolution. Graham was also the first to help steer a new evangelical movement away from the stricter dogmatic line of the early fundamentalists.

The soaring growth of [pentecostalism](#) is a significant part of the new evangelical wave of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Pentecostal worship emphasizes the “gifts of the Holy Spirit,” including [“speaking in tongues,”](#) reliving, in a sense, the experience of the early church on the first Pentecost. This movement is especially strong in the growing cities of Latin America, Africa, and the U.S. where the



Adapted from On Common Ground (www.piransin.org/christianity)

pentecostal style of spirit-filled worship has created vibrant new Christian communities.

"School for midwives in El-Daien," Sudan, UNAMID, 2012, Flickr Creative Commons.